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Title: A Birthday Tribute to Oppie Listen to a rare interview from 1965,
print a keepsake poster

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A Birthday Tribute to Oppie

Listen to a rare interview from 1965, print a keepsake poster

By the [National Security Research Center](#) staff

The Lab's first Director and brilliant physicist shied away from the spotlight, particularly after leaving Los Alamos following the end of World War II in 1945.

But when J. Robert Oppenheimer spoke, his words commanded attention.

In commemoration of what would've been Oppenheimer's 117th birthday on April 22, the National Security Research Center (NSRC), the lab's classified library, is sharing [a rare interview from the Voices of the Manhattan Project](#) and an original poster that can be printed and displayed.

Hear Oppie speak

The nearly 45-minute interview was recorded just two years before Oppenheimer died from throat cancer on February 18, 1967. Oppenheimer talks about creating the world's first atomic bombs and life in Los Alamos, including the difficulty of developing an implosion-type weapon and walking his son to preschool.

Here's what Oppenheimer said about:

- **Meeting Manhattan Project leader Gen. Leslie Groves:** "The first meeting with Groves was at the house of the president of the University for California. ... I said, 'This thing will never get on the rails unless there is a place where people can talk to each other and work together on the problems of the bomb. And this could be at Oak Ridge (Tennessee), it could be some California desert, but someplace, there has got to be a place where people are free to discuss what they know and what they do not know and to find out what they can.' And that made an impression on him."
- **Choosing Los Alamos as the site for the secret lab:** "(Groves) liked the Los Alamos site, which I showed him ... So the work on the Los Alamos project started in the autumn of '42 and I was involved in the design of laboratories, houses. All the houses had balconies and fireplaces. ... And we moved out there, my family and I, in mid-March of '43 and moved up to the

May signing of the first scientists. ... Well, we actually moved into one of the teacher's houses that had been there in the old school. The new houses were not yet complete, the laboratory was not complete, but it was possible to establish a headquarters."

- **Designing an implosion-type weapon:** "Well, I think the set of problems connected with implosion was the most difficult and it required very new experimental techniques. And it was not a branch of physics which anyone was very familiar with. This was, both from a theoretical, from an observational, and from a practical point of view, quite an adventure and it was still a very reasonable opinion that one of the many things that were needed to make it work was not completely in order on July 16 (1945, which was the Trinity test in which the implosion-type weapon was successfully detonated in the New Mexico desert)."
- **His typical Los Alamos day:** "We lived about a third of a mile from the laboratory. I would try to get to the laboratory on normal days about 8 or something like that and take our son ... to the nursery school on the way. ... We would just walk there and I would usually break for a little while between 12 and 1 because there was nowhere to eat, no food. And I would come home and then get back and I worked until 6. And perhaps two or three times a week or four times a week, I would go back in the evening. After dinner. And we often found it possible to go off on our horses Saturday or Sunday, usually not both days. And of course, not in the dead of winter. My wife did a little skiing. Once every two or three months, we would spend Saturday night in Santa Fe and feel somewhat more human."
- **Developing the world's first atomic weapons:** "Well, it was certainly sui generis (unique). It was the first thing of just that kind. ... it was certainly something novel."

Want a poster?

In celebration of Oppenheimer's birthday, the NSRC's graphic designers **Paul Ziomek** and **Mercedes Martinez** (Communication Arts and Services, CPA-CAS), have created a poster that can be printed and displayed.

Part of the Lab legacy

Looking for more? You can listen to audio from a speech Oppenheimer gave about his fellow Manhattan Project scientist Niels Bohr in 1964 on a return visit to Los Alamos.

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1eJQdXvRF2LY_owlyuewCkHez76uclcBK/view?usp=sharing

You can also listen to a 1945 address he made to the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia, shortly after WWII ended.

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1evTi1CHswK7omkMoxEBokTEUsALDbpMh/view?usp=sharing>

More photos and stories about J. Robert Oppenheimer are part of the collections at the [National Security Research Center](#), the Lab's classified library in the National Security Sciences Building. You may know one -- share your favorite Oppenheimer story with us! Contact us at nsrc@lanl.gov.



Lab Director J. Robert Oppenheimer and Manhattan Project leader Gen. Leslie Groves are pictured here at the Trinity test site in the New Mexico desert following the successful detonation of the world's first atomic weapon on July 16, 1945. Photos and other materials from the wartime laboratory are part of the collections in the National Security Research Center, the Lab's classified library.

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1TOVWaYrY3u5yBqgZISQvWvfwSnHjNT5O/view?usp=sharing>



J. Robert Oppenheimer, far right, was the Lab's first director. Although he was known for his storytelling and wit, Oppenheimer did not seek the spotlight, particularly following the end of World War II after he left the Los Alamos.

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1mypP5vkkDHZePxMz23h52Ui61FeZCuJO/view?usp=sharing>



J. Robert Oppenheimer sits in his Director's chair when he returned to Los Alamos for a visit in 1964. April 22 would have been Oppenheimer's 117th birthday. He died from throat cancer in 1967.

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1-2q9OLTHlyJrYj6yhks5r-oPonsVcHGV/view?usp=sharing>